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Greece and Rome on Screen: on the Possibilities and Promises of a New Medium

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Jp[Contrary to the widely held view that early films are largely lost, dozens of films related to ancient Greece, Rome and the other civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean survive scattered in film archives across Europe and North America. Only a small number of these films have been restored digitally and made available through home-video formats or online video streaming. The great majority of the films is accessible only through film prints available for onsite viewing in archival film collections with flatbed film-viewing facilities or in specialized film festivals. With the help of the “Treasures from the Film Archives” database of the International Federation of Film Archives, the open access database of the “Media History Digital Library” and the online catalogues of film archives, libraries and other institutions, one can trace a significant number of films made during the first twenty years of cinema. One can also collect valuable information about their production, distribution and exhibition with the help of ephemera such as production stills, screenplays, posters, reviews and film catalogues. What is distinctive about this body of archival films and its contexts? Why is it that a viewing technology and an art form associated with modernity turned its attention to antiquity from the very beginning? Which antiquity did it engage with? These are the questions that will form the basis for the discussion undertaken in this chapter.

Jha[Film or Cinema?

Jp[The focus of this chapter is on the first two decades of cinema, and more specifically on the period between the 1890s and the mid-1900s which is often identified as “early cinema” and the period from around 1907 to around 1913 which is often referred to as the “transitional period.” The cinema of this twenty-year period is often defined in opposition to the more familiar and mainstream types of cinema that follow it. It is called a period of “short films” (as opposed to “feature films”), or “trick films” (a dominant genre of the period to be eclipsed by the arrival of some of the more canonical genres with which we are familiar today), as “cinema of attractions” (as opposed to a cinema preoccupied with narrative causality and character development; Gunning 1990), as “kine-attractography” (as opposed to the more conventional “cinema”; Gaudreault 2011) or more broadly as a period of sensationalism or exhibitionism (as opposed to the realism or artistic maturity of later cinema). How to describe

this period is inevitably implicated in debates about continuity and change in cinema history. It is also implicated in debates about what cinema is. Is it a technological medium, an art form or an industry? If cinema is understood as moving images, as filmstrips run in rapid succession to give the illusion of lifelike movement, it was born with Thomas Edison's kinematoscope films or with Etienne-Jules Marey's chronophotography films at the turn of the 1890s. If understood as filmstrips run through a projector, it was invented by the Lumière brothers in the mid-1890s. If understood as a social practice or as an art form, cinema was formed at a later stage, around 1910. The word "cinematograph" itself is a classicizing neologism ("writing of movement") with a complex history: it is commonly associated with the camera invented by the Lumière brothers, but it was first coined by Léon Bouly for another motion picture device in 1892, whereas in its abbreviated form, "cinema" began to be used as a label for moving images only from the late 1910s.

It is common to see film history in biological terms, through a model of growth that raises questions about origins while also infantilizing cinema's first two decades. It is also common to see film history in teleological terms, with the two most dominant modes being those of a drive towards artistic maturity (cinema as an art in an upward trajectory from primitive to sophisticated and from naïve to self-aware) and of a drive towards realism (cinema as popular culture moving from silent to sound to color to widescreen to 3D). These two narratives are often in tension (cinema as an art form versus cinema as popular culture), but they both cast early cinema in the same position of infantile lack and inferiority. Applying their logic within the period itself before 1914, one can argue for a progression from the shorter and more naïve films of the 1890s to the longer, more complex, more sophisticated, artistically more mature and technically more competent and realistic films of the late 1900s and the early 1910s. This is certainly a way of thinking endorsed by many of the film practitioners of the time and exploited to the full by the publicity campaigns around them in an attempt to gain an advantage over their competitors. In fact, a large number of films related to antiquity belong to the rather limited output of quality films, especially adaptations, produced from around 1907. The pressure to demonstrate that film had matured and that it needed to be taken seriously as an art form can be linked to the greater reliance on narrative complexity and psychological characters after 1906, with films such as *A Slave's Love* (1907), to some of the first artistically ambitious films aimed to attract middle-class audiences produced by the French company Film d'Art in 1908, such as *The Return of Ulysses*,¹ to the cultural debate about moving pictures in the United States which starts with films such as *Julius Caesar* in

1908, and to the first international successes of Italian cinema between 1909 and 1911 with films such as *Nero* (1909), *The Fall of Troy* (1910) and *Odyssey* (1911).

There are, however, other interpretative possibilities that in recent years have gained more traction. One can argue that cinema as an institution did not really take shape until around 1910; that before this time, the practice of filmstrip projection should be seen not in relation to a cinema to come, but in relation to technological and artistic developments that began much earlier in the nineteenth century and of which the projection of filmstrips was not always the inevitable conclusion. For instance, the “cinematograph” could be linked to other inventions of the nineteenth century that were preoccupied with still images, moving images, or projection and that were driven by the double imperative of science and entertainment: from photography and magic lantern slides to devices such as the phenakistiscope, the stroboscope, the tachyscope and chronophotography (Crary 1990). With the exception of photography, such devices may have now been reduced to mere technological curiosities, but their impact on nineteenth-century visions of antiquity must not be underestimated (however under-researched). Early films themselves are full of visual devices, both real and imagined. For instance, in George Méliès’ *Long Distance Wireless Photography* (*La photographie électrique à distance*, 1908), a large fantastic machine is used to project on a screen an image of a small painting depicting the Three Graces. Upon projection, the Three Muses come to life, to the amazement of the photographer’s clients. The machine that dominates the film frame compresses the various phases between film recording and film exhibition into something resembling real-time televisual liveness (Olsson 2005: 152). At the same time, the transformation of the motionless goddesses on the canvas to live models on the screen demonstrates how the technology of the period seeks to transcend representational realism and promises access to the embodied reality of beauty and grace that traditional arts can only imitate.

The practice of projecting filmstrips can also be seen as coexisting with, drawing on, and competing against dominant forms of stage entertainment and display practices of a fin-de-siècle culture. Early cinema has an often-neglected affinity to visual spectacles of the period with a strong performative quality, such as magic sketches, magic lantern shows, fairy plays, pantomime and variety shows. When taken into consideration, this affinity plays an important role in early cinema’s unique status and “troubling alien quality” (Gaudreault 2011: 34). For instance, in Méliès’ *Long Distance Wireless Photography*, the animation of the pictorial depiction of the Three Graces situates the film not only in relation to real and imagined visual technologies of the period but also in relation to the entertainment world of vaudeville and

more specifically to the popular performance practice of *tableaux vivants* or “living pictures.” In another film by Méliès, *Jupiter’s Thunderbolts* (*Le Tonnerre de Jupiter*, 1903), the king of the gods conjures the nine Muses in a hall of his celestial palace on Mount Olympus. The Muses first appear as statues before they then come to life, beginning to dance and sing for (and with) him, until their cacophony and unruliness make him dismiss them, at which point they are made to turn back to stone and then to disappear again. What we have here is the film’s director, stage designer, producer and protagonist as the new master of the arts, with the power to conjure up painting, sculpture, song, music and dance, to combine them into an intermedial and interactive spectacle but also to quell their insubordination.

Another possibility for early film history is to argue that films of this period are not marginal for later cinema but central to it precisely because of their ability to combine the production and dissemination of popular entertainment on an unprecedented scale with the radical potential of intense artistic experimentation. Seen in this way, early cinema poses a challenge for distinctions that may seem familiar today but that emerged and consolidated only in later periods—distinctions such as those between high and low cinema, between self-reflection and realism, or between commercial and art-house cinema. Early cinema also questions the neo-Aristotelian focus on storytelling over spectacle that has informed much of the scholarly work on later cinema. In fact one can go a step further to argue that the potential of cinema as it emerged before 1914 has never been fully realized by the bifurcations of later cinema between commercial and art-house, between cinema as an art form and cinema as an industry.

What was that potential? At a very basic level it has to do with a profound reconceptualization of representation as a result of the emergence of new audio-visual technologies for the storage, transmission and retrieval of knowledge. Seen as a medium rather than as an art form or industry (Ligensa and Kreimeier 2009; Albera and Tortajada 2010), film encapsulates an epistemic shift in the way the world, including antiquity, is perceived and understood, a shift that needs to be related to the emergence around 1900 or soon after of new disciplines including psychoanalysis, archaeology and anthropology, but also of new artistic movements such as modernism.

As the title of Méliès’ *Jupiter’s Thunderbolts* suggests, the true protagonist of the film is not Jupiter himself but his thunderbolts. Newly forged by Vulcan, they give him the thrill and excitement of power, but they also burn his hands, go off prematurely, and eventually force him out of the film frame. The thunderbolts prove a power superior even to the father of the gods himself, seizing control over the narrative and title of the film. As a film producer, director and actor, Jupiter may be able to assert the superiority of film over traditional arts but

he fails to control the raw power of the technical objects at his disposal and the spectacle they create. The contrast between the antiquity of the first wizard of cinema and the antiquity of Karl Marx is illuminating. For Marx, alienation in modernity is understood as separation from the classical past and its mythologies: “What chance has Vulcan against Roberts & Co., Jupiter against the lightning-rod and Hermes against the Crédit Mobilier? All mythology overcomes and dominates and shapes the forces of nature in the imagination and by the imagination; it therefore vanishes with the advent of real mastery over them” (Marx 1993, 110). For Méliès, on the other hand, classical mythology and the imagination are not made irrelevant in the modern world. Rather, they are radically reconfigured in ways that help the spectator play out and perhaps work through the shocks of modernity, shocks related to the miraculous and uncanny force of an increasingly technologized environment and the ensuing complexities of the human condition within it.

]ha[Which Antiquity?

]p[Greece and Rome appear in a whole range of popular film genres of this period: fiction films such as fantasy films, optical trick films, comedies, historical dramas, animation and melodramas, but also non-fiction films such as travelogues, dance films, and filmed theater. Geographically, the majority of these films come from just three powerhouses of early film production, USA, Italy and France, but circulate widely around the globe: the scattering of surviving film prints in collections from Sao Paolo to Tokyo is sometimes directly related to the complex routes of early film distribution. Thematically, the films of this period engage with Greece and Rome in a range of ways. Some of them relate to specific historical individuals (*A Modern Sappho*, 1905, *Julius Caesar*, 1908, *Nero* 1909, *The Death of Socrates*, 1909, *Cleopatra*, 1910), literary or artistic works (*An Artist's Dream*, 1897, *The Island of Calypso: Ulysses and the Giant Polyphemus*, 1905, *Ben-Hur*, 1907, *The Return of Ulysses*, 1908, *Lysistrata*, 1910) or classical locations (*A Trip to Greece*, 1908, *The Ancient Rome*, 1909). Many films feature mythological characters and stories which are not directly linked to specific textual or visual narratives but which nevertheless have strong links to Greece and Rome: Hercules, Prometheus, Pygmalion, Orpheus, Narcissus, King Midas, the Minotaur. A third group of films features more loose connections to the Greco-Roman world, with the linguistic and pictorial identity of that world confined to isolated signs related to classical or classicizing architecture (film design, outdoor filming in Mediterranean-style gardens, filming on location in archaeological sites), costumes (white robes for women or tunics for men), or names. For instance, in some of the earliest film dances ever produced such as *Cupid and Psyche* (1897), *Neptune's Daughters* (1900), and *A Nymph of the Waves*

(1900), there is very little other than the film title itself that allows us to draw a firm link between the mixture of dancing styles displayed on the screen (ballet and variety-style dancing) and the world of classical antiquity.

Some of the differences in the cinematic reception of Greece and Rome that become prominent in later periods (especially after the Second World War) are not totally absent from this period: Rome has a more distinct visual and thematic identity associated with the dramas of history; Greece is more malleable and more clearly linked to mythology and literary adaptations. Rome has associations with imperial politics, urbanism and Christianity; Greece has more to do with the imagination. Rome is made relevant to the modern world through analogy; Greece through symbolism. For instance, one could argue that the divide between the historical dramas of Rome and a Greece associated with the fantastical can be mapped onto the dichotomy between documentary realism and fictional fantasy as it emerges out of the contrasting cinematic styles of Lumière and Méliès. At the same time, however, there is a strong sense in which the films of this early period engage with Greece and Rome not so much as historically and symbolically distinct entities but as interrelated and often indistinct parts of a rich and vibrant classical tradition. Arguably, this is true for popular culture more broadly, including later types of cinema as well. The drive for early films to situate themselves squarely within the culture of classicism, first as newcomers and competitors with other arts but also, especially towards the 1910s, as its custodians, is at least as strong as any desire to mark categorical distinctions within that culture. The dominant mode of the period is an irreverent process of aesthetic and cultural hybridity and homogenization of Greece and Rome, with little interest in issues of accuracy and fidelity towards sources or in distinctions between different eras, cultures, and styles. This goes hand in hand with a similarly strong interest in the ways in which classicism is opposed to, and often threatened by, the orientalism of Babylon, the Middle East and Pharaonic Egypt (Michelakis and Wyke 2013: 12–14).

This process of hybridity and homogenization operates simultaneously at a cultural level and at a narrative and aesthetic level and needs to be connected to film as a “total art form” (in the manner of Wagner’s opera). But for the purposes of this chapter it also needs to be connected to film as a “total medium” encapsulating a new episteme. The emergence of cinema creates new possibilities for the representation and conceptualization of Greece and Rome. Text-based and image-based models of antiquity are suddenly replaced by an embodied antiquity in motion. From a film-historical point of view, this turn to antiquity can be seen as a pragmatic ploy for respectability and artistic legitimization on the part of early cinema and its

nineteenth-century predecessors. But from an epistemological point of view, this mode of referencing classical antiquity has far-reaching implications for the way in which Greco-Roman antiquity itself is perceived as the object of knowledge and perception around 1900. Cultures previously perceived as remote and inaccessible, the object of contemplation from a distance or the product of the imagination, are suddenly transformed into a vivid but fleeting reality to be experienced through the senses. Film makes possible the generation of new modes of perception and thought in modernity within which Greece and Rome become not only more vivid, but also more complex, dynamic, and enigmatic. This is not the first time that Greece and Rome enter modern popular culture (nineteenth-century photography, the novel, theatre and opera are important predecessors of cinema in this respect), but it is arguably the first time that they enter the modern imagination so pervasively across social, cultural and geographical boundaries.

Greco-Roman antiquity is important during this period primarily in terms of film form and content: plot, set design, costumes, acting styles, sound, and so on. Its bearing on issues of film genre, film theory and cinema architecture is very limited until around 1910. This is not surprising in view of the fact that cinema itself does not emerge as an institution with regulated production, exhibition and distribution practices and as an art form with its own aesthetic and narrative strategies until around this time. While the so-called “classical” film narrative that begins to consolidate in the late 1910s acquires its name as a result of an investment in classicizing terminology of film critics of later generations (Williams 2000), it is nevertheless entirely consistent with the classicizing drive that manifests itself in various other ways from around 1910: film genres such as epic emerge and define their identity and generic parameters through engagement with ancient literary epics (Michelakis 2013b), the first screenwriting manuals invite reflection on film narrative through a return to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the first cinema palaces use neoclassical architecture, and the first theoretical writings on cinema create an archaeology of “writing in movement” that links cinema to ancient vase paintings, Greek tragedy, and other classical art forms (Michelakis 2013a, 1–3 and 111–117).

]ha[Spectatorship

]p[In mainstream commercial cinema the spectator is often perceived as being immersed in the action in the way that Roland Barthes describes for the widescreen films of the 1950s:

]ex[I am on an enormous balcony, I move effortlessly within the field’s range, I freely pick out what interests me, in a word I begin to be surrounded [...] here I am, no longer under the image but in front of it, in the middle of it, separated

from it by this ideal distance, necessary to creation, which is no longer that of the glance but that of the arm's reach [...] the balcony of History is ready. What remains to be seen is what we'll be shown there. (Barthes 1954)]/ex[

]p[The “balcony of history” is a concept that Barthes formulates in the 1950s in response to the novelty of CinemaScope, but at a fundamental level it describes a viewing experience that can be associated with both later and earlier types of cinema, including the first film epics of the 1910s. For instance in *The Fall of Troy* (1910) the spectator is invited to look at the burning city of Troy from the vantage point of Helen and Paris who stand on a balcony of the royal palace. The balcony of history gives unmediated access to past events as they unfold, but it also provides a safe distance from them, distance that makes possible to gain eyewitness knowledge of history for pleasure and education. In many ways Roland Barthes' balcony of history points towards the hugely influential (even if reductive and monolithic) scopophilic model of spectatorship advanced to describe the spectator of mainstream cinema (Mulvey 1989). Hidden in a darkened space, the spectator enjoys the spectacle on the screen voyeuristically. The spectacle itself stimulates voyeurism with the help of a narrative driven by suspense, by the promise of revealing what is constantly deferred.

A persistent narrative about early cinema spectatorship focuses on a very different kind of spectator, the naïve spectator who runs away in panic from the fast-approaching train on the screen or who runs towards the screen in an attempt to save the heroine in danger. It may well be that such naïve spectators never really existed except perhaps as urban myths fuelled by cinema's own desire for attention-seeking publicity (Elsaesser 2009: 14–17). However the films themselves suggest modes of embodied viewing and modes of narrating which are very different from those associated with Barthes' balcony of history. Early spectators may often be cast in the role of the voyeur but equally often they are addressed in a direct manner. The spectacle on the screen is not based on a cause-and-effect narrative, where everything moves towards a resolution that holds the key to the questions raised by the plot. Rather, it is based on a succession of visually powerful scenes which are only loosely connected with one another, resulting in what Aristotle in the *Poetics* or modern critics of action movies would summarily condemn as “episodic plot.” Early cinema concentrates on moments of exciting spectacle of interest in themselves that aim to give the spectator pleasure through the quick arousal and satisfaction of curiosity. The early spectator is not just an eyewitness but someone who is complicit to this spectacle, who participates in it and experiences it through shocks and thrills. One question is at whose expense are the various tricks played—there are important issues here of gender, class and ethnicity. Another question is whether the pleasure

derived from such films is “mere fun” or whether an aesthetic of shocks and thrills has more profound implications for how cinema relates to modern life as a symptom or as a reaction to it. While a more systematic examination of early cinema spectatorship might focus on broader issues of social identity as they interact with exhibition practices (Cooper 2005), the discussion that follows concentrates on two examples of how spectatorial responses are anticipated by early film narrative modes of address.

Georges Hatot's *Nero Testing Poison on Slaves* (*Néron essayant des poisons sur des esclaves*) was produced in 1897. In a narrative that is less than a minute long, slaves are brought before Nero's throne and are made to drink poisons, while Nero himself observes with intense interest their agony and death at his feet. The film consists of a single shot, with a static camera. No editing is involved in it, although careful prefilmic preparation is required for the sets, props, costumes, and the movement of the actors in and out of the frame. The issue of how violence is depicted on screen and why antiquity offers legitimate ground for the testing of the limits of acceptability and of the boundaries of censorship shows no sign of dying out in the age of video games and cable television. In that respect, and for all its simplicity, the film can be situated at the origins of a persistent feature of cinema's fascination with antiquity. The question of what kind of take the film offers on the display of violence (is it about violence or is it about display? Does it lead to a critique or to a celebration of violence?) cannot be addressed without considering its engagement with previous representation of the same topic in the visual and performance arts or the broader debate about artistic attitudes towards pain and death that can be traced back to Lessing in the eighteenth century and to Plato in antiquity. The film can be read as a reductive take on the tragic story of the poisoner Locusta stripped down to a single scene devoid of narrative context. But, while bodily mutilation and violent shape-shifting are common themes in the magic trick films of this period, what we have here is a more realistic depiction of suffering closer to morbid forms of entertainment associated with the fairground, including non-fiction films featuring public executions and the electrocution of animals. As the emperor leans over and looks intensely at the agonizing death of the poisoned slaves, his mastery and control over the spectacle goes hand in hand with his bodily re-enactment of the victims' convulsions of pain. The film satisfies a curiosity not by suspense but by surprise. Like Nero, the spectator can experience the agonizing pain of the slaves again and again, at will, but not without impulsive bodily reactions that replicate the violent juxtaposition between life and death, presence and absence, power and submission as it is played out on the screen.

Another interesting example for how spectatorship works in early cinema is provided by George Méliès' *Pygmalion and Galatea* (*Pygmalion et Galathée*, 1898). As the online catalogue of the American Film Institute puts it, the film features Méliès as Pygmalion “at work in his studio on the statue of Galatea, who, on being completed, comes to life. He attempts to clasp her to his arms, when the bust leaves the body and crossing the room mocks at him standing with the lower portion of her body in his hands.” Like numerous other films of this period, it features a male creator and a female statue, raising issues about the objectification of female beauty, the male-dominated world of artistic creativity and the relation between the animate and the inanimate. The film also draws on the popularity of the Pygmalion myth, animated statues, and the sculptural ideal in tableaux vivants, pose plastiques and popular theatre (Nead 2007: 45–104; Hersey 2009; Marshall 1998; Macintosh 2013). But whereas for most of these art forms the appeal of the story lies in the desire for animation and the transformative moment of transition from stone to flesh, in this film there is no room to develop anticipation or to reflect on the emotional effects of the miraculous transformation. Pygmalion runs hopelessly behind Galatea's animated statue and seeks in vain to clasp her in his arms, to regain control over his creation through haptic perception. The film turns the objectification of feminine beauty and the aestheticization of matter as a project of male desire and creativity to something that has its own agency and leaves no room for contemplation. If, as Nead argues, “the dream of motion haunts the visual arts from the classical period to the present day” (2007, 45), the film shows how frenetic and erratic motion can be associated with the stirring up and frustration of desire, with disbelief and disorientation. If we should see in this film “the story of the invention of cinema itself,” with cinema, like the statue of Galatea, being a descendant of the automata of the Enlightenment (Wood 2002: 189), the film associates the life-like not only with the wondrous but also with the uncanny (Marcus 2007). What is more, it airs anxieties about the failure to separate between real life and the lifelike, the natural and the artificial, in a manner that keeps Pygmalion, the object of ridicule, at a distance from the spectator. Pygmalion, like other naïve characters of early cinema, is “‘trapped’ in the superabundance of data” of early cinema for the benefit of the spectator: in the age of mechanical reproduction and of commodity fetishism, proximity and possession come to be redefined not in tactile terms but in visual terms. Cinema shows spectators how not to behave, or as Elsaesser puts it “in the cinema—as in the modern world of urban display and self-display—the rule is ‘you may look, but you may not touch’” (2009, 16).

]ha[Color

[p]The oscillation between and within different types of polychromy and monochromy informs cinematic representations of antiquity throughout cinema's history. If mainstream film genres of classical Hollywood celebrate their classicism through thematic and formal links with neo-classical discourses about beauty in glorious black and white, sword and sandal movies celebrate countercultural values through an aesthetic of intense colors associated with the foreign, the feminine and the vulgar. If Hollywood Technicolor seeks to remain subdued and diegetically motivated, experimentation with film color outside Hollywood goes for a stylization based on sensuous colors explicitly situated within larger intermedial contexts. For the purposes of this chapter, the most interesting moments in the cinematic history of color are those where polychromy and monochromy encounter each other within the space of the same film narrative. For instance, in Zack Snyder's *300* there is a sharp juxtaposition between the saturated colors of orientalizing excess and the sepia monochromy of the Greek male body that stands for a broader clash of civilizations. In Oliver Stone's *Alexander* the classicizing monochromy of white statues and architecture is once again set in opposition to the monumentality and sensual allure of orientalizing excess, though in this case the possibility of a reconciliation between the two is also raised. In Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, two types of monochromy fight against each other: the greyscale monochromy of imperial power clashes against the sepia monochromy of personal memory before they both give way to a republic of colors, a republic for which the film's protagonist fights to the death. This color coding of distinct cultural and ideological takes on antiquity does not confine itself only to the digital age. In Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt*, for instance, a polemical return to the aesthetic dissonance of ancient sculptural polychromy highlights color as an external "supplement" and as an autonomous means of expression contributing "to the dissolution of a fixed perspective" (Hanssen 2006: 132).

One of the most fascinating chapters in this history of oscillation between monochromy and polychromy in cinematic representations of classical antiquity comes from the silent era. Many of the films on Greece and Rome produced in the first two decades of cinema were made with the help of early color techniques ranging from toning and tinting to kinemacolor, demonstrating the link between the symbolic value of antiquity and the higher production and exhibition costs of film seeking to appeal to the middle classes. For the purposes of this chapter I want to concentrate on a small selection of color films produced by the French companies Pathé and Gaumont, and more specifically on the stencil effects used in these films, for three reasons. First, because the encounter between polychromy and monochromy in this body of films appears as an aesthetic norm, informing the composition of their

narrative at all levels. Second, because this encounter of different attitudes towards color does not always manifest itself in terms of an ideological clash but often holds the promise of a synthesis. And third, because this body of films comes at a significant historical juncture, just before an aesthetic of monochromy prevails in a classicizing cinema coming of age but also across the arts, as modernism revisits and redefines the foundations of classical art.

The earliest among the films I want to discuss is one of the very last serpentine dance films to be made in the first decade of cinema, produced by Pathé in 1905 (often identified erroneously as ‘Loie Fuller’ or descriptively as ‘Serpentine Dance by follower of Loie Fuller’). The film begins with a bat flying through the air against the backdrop of a classical temple and a rural landscape. As soon as it lands on the ground, it is transformed into a female dancer waving “her voluminous costume-like wings” in the style of the American pioneer of modern dance Loie Fuller (see Figure 1.1). After two minutes of constant changes of shape and color, what enters the frame as a dark green bat finally vanishes as a colorful tornado, leaving behind an empty space. At one level, the film provides us with competing models for thinking about Greece, setting up a contrast between greyscale and static images in the background and a colorful movement that “obscures and dissolves the [human] body” in the foreground (Brannigan 2011: 23).

[Figure 1.1 near here]

Seen in this way, an intermedial clash is being dramatized here, with cinema siding with the performing arts of dance and vaudeville against the visual arts of painting and architecture. But to cast this dynamic juxtaposition of art forms and colors only in terms of a clash would be to underestimate the significance of bringing them together in the first instance. The echoes of Greek antiquity were always present in Loie Fuller’s technological spectacles of movement and light, both in the voluptuousness and mysticism of her movements and in the whiteness of her robes (Albright 2007). But, to my knowledge, this is the only dance film inspired by her choreographic work that brings out the connection of that work with classical Greece in its use of sets. The greyscale sets in the background, no less than the colorful dancer in the foreground, contribute to the same process of abstraction whereby the visual identity of Greece is reduced to isolated signs such as the temple, the robe, the harmony between (wo)man and nature. Seen in this way, the coexistence of monochromy and polychromy in this film does not seek to create hierarchies between the different strands of the classical tradition on which it draws but to break them down and reassemble them as a new type of spectacle in which they are inseparable.

In *Roman Orgy* (*L'orgie romain*), directed by Louis Feuillade for Gaumont in 1911, the effeminate emperor Heliogabalus appears to be in full control of the film's color palette just as he is in full control of the narrative. Scene after scene, his clothes have as many hues as the clothes of all the characters put together. As the narrative progresses, this flamboyant spectacle of absolute power and excess is set up in opposition to the forces of order and reason that ultimately prevail. For instance, one of the orgies he organizes takes place under the watchful eye of Emperor Augustus, whose white marble statue stands right in the middle of the composition. The same contrast appears in a later scene, where Heliogabalus, pursued by the Praetorian Guard, hides in a room dominated by the solemn gaze of another monochrome marble bust. What we have here is a political and moral reading, if there is one, of monochromy and polychromy as contrasting forms of power: one of them associated with decadence, the other with law and order. Given the clarity of this juxtaposition, the final scene where the Praetorian Guard punishes the transgressive emperor comes as a surprise. All members of the guard wear colorful armor that competes in intensity with the clothes worn by Heliogabalus himself (Figure 1.2). Can we explain this? The proliferation of color in this final scene is not dissonant with a search for narrative closure, especially if we consider it in conjunction with the shocking decapitation of the tyrant (just off the screen frame) and the momentary glimpse of his severed head. The progressive movement of the narrative towards order is depicted against the canvas of a history where the colorful pleasures of shock and horror offer enduring continuities.

]figure 1.2 near here[

Another useful example of the interaction between monochromy and polychromy can be found in the mythological adaptation entitled *The Marriage of Cupid and Psyche* (*Le mariage de l'amour*), produced by Pathé, probably in 1913. In the first scene, all characters appear in colored costumes against a similarly colored background representing a palace hall. The only character that stands out is the film's female protagonist, played by the dancer and actress Stacia Napierkowska, whose white dress highlights her statuesque beauty but also underscores her loneliness and isolation. The following scene features a divine assembly in which Venus and her companions are all dressed in white, against the subdued colors of the idyllic woodland that surrounds them. This scene reinforces the neoclassical associations of the white color with timeless beauty, but at the same time it comes across as lifeless and lacking in depth when compared to the world of the mortal characters of the previous scene. In the final scene, Psyche is seduced by Cupid in a sequence featuring a visual feast of food-bearing spirits that appear out of thin air, statues, flowers, tiger skin rugs on the floor, and

other rich ornaments. This visual feast seeks to seduce the spectator in the way it seduces Psyche, not least by setting on display some of the “special effects of the fairy and trick genres” (Yumibe 2012, 126). However, none of the spectacular items at the foreground of the composition appears in color. Colors are reserved only for the two characters of Psyche and Cupid themselves in the middle ground and the curtains and columns opening on to a garden in the background. What we have here is in many ways the reverse of what we found in the *Serpentine Dance* of 1905. Color appears to be the norm against which the divine, the miraculous, and the exotic are highlighted in black and white.

Conclusion

The small and diverse sample of films discussed above allows us to trace a development in the use of film color from novelty to accepted norm within a relatively short period of intense artistic and technological experimentation with a specific coloring technique. More important than that, though, the selective and partial application of color associated with stenciling allows reflection on larger debates about polychromy and monochromy. Each film frame opens up a different range of possibilities for the configuration of the relation between color and black and white. As well as mapping this diversity onto the rise and fall of a specific coloring technique in a specific national context, we may also use it as a starting point for thinking about the larger history of color in modernity as a history of discontinuous practices resonating with persistent tropes.

Color and spectatorship are by no means the only two topics through which a discussion about Greece and Rome in early cinema might be undertaken. This chapter has touched on a number of other issues that relate to developments in film narrative and style, and to relations with other art forms and media. Various other topics could have been included. For instance under the general heading of modes of production, distribution and exhibition, one could discuss sound, early cinema architecture, national traditions and cultural and socioeconomic contexts. While early cinema remains one of the most under-researched areas of the encounter between cinema and Greco-Roman antiquity, it raises historiographical, methodological and theoretical issues that can help challenge, or at least de-emphasize, teleological or essentialist approaches to cinema, popular distinctions between high art and popular culture or between commercial and art-house cinema, and familiar modes of film analysis including auteurism, stardom and genre criticism. Perhaps more importantly, it provides a deeper understanding of film and its contribution to the modern reception of Greece and Rome, not only in terms of cinema as an art form or industry but also in terms of

film as a medium with the power to transform the types of knowledge that can be recorded and disseminated and the ways in which subjectivity is constructed in modernity.

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Further Reading

Research on the reception of Greece and Rome in early cinema is complicated by the difficulty of accessing films and other archival materials of this period. Many early films exist only in film prints held in film archives and are available for viewing either onsite using flatbed facilities or in one-off screenings in specialized film festivals. However, this is a fast-changing research landscape, with a relatively steady flow of films being restored and digitized each year for release on DVD or through online video streaming. While such digital modes of viewing provide unrivalled access to and control over the filmic narrative, they nevertheless lack the performative dimensions, perceptual pleasures, and cognitive challenges of collective viewing of filmstrips projected on the large screen with live musical

accompaniment. So far there has been no systematic attempt to identify which films of this period are available commercially or through online streaming. The single most authoritative source for locating film prints in film archives is the subscription-based and slightly out-of-date database “Treasures from the Film Archives” of the International Federation of Film Archives. The identification and collection of materials around films of this period requires extensive archival research. A good starting point is the open access Media History Digital Library (<http://mediahistoryproject.org/>) and the online catalogues of film archives, libraries, and other institutions such as the American Film Institute, the British Film Institute, the French Cinematheque, and the Library of Congress. An extensive list of films related to Greece and Rome which is particularly helpful for early cinema can be found in Dumont 2013. Basic information about many of these films can also be found in the Internet Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com/>). Broad reference works on early cinema include Burch 1990, Elsaesser and Barker 1990, Grieveson and Krämer 2004, Abel 2005, Gaudreault 2011 and Gaudreault, Dulac and Hidalgo 2012. So far, the only collection of articles devoted exclusively to silent cinema and the Greco-Roman world is Michelakis and Wyke 2013. On the related fields of Pharaonic Egypt, the Bible and Shakespeare in silent cinema see respectively the works by Lant 1992, Shepherd 2013 and Buchanan 2011.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1.1: Imitator of American modern dance pioneer Loie Fuller in “serpentine dance” film produced by Pathé, France, in 1905. Screen capture from DVD © British Film Institute, 2012

Figure 1.2: Emperor Heliogabalus about to be killed by the Praetorian Guard in the final scene of Louis Feuillade’s *Roman Orgy* (*L’orgie romain*, France, 1911). Screen capture from digital copy of the print held at the EYE Film Institute in Amsterdam.

]hx[Endnote

¹ Released in the United States in 1909.